Eyes wide shut: Commons Defence Committee and UK security policy

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It appears self-evident to a key Westminster committee that global insecurity requires a significant upgrade in UK military capability. Self-evident—and wrong.

Power projection: the inquiry by Sir John Chilcot into the lessons of UK involvement in the Iraq war has yet to be published. Flickr / UK Ministry of Defence. Some rights reserved.

The Defence Committee generally produces high-quality, balanced reports which challenge government practices and narratives but the latest falls short of the usual standard. The report rests on unsupported assertions and reflects a narrow, militaristic view of security. It demonstrates little or no consideration of the efficacy of force in pursuit of UK security objectives in an era of complex globalisation—in particular the effects of employing military firepower in the Middle East over the past decade and a half. It presents a wish-list of military capabilities to match an endless agenda of immediate 'threats' purportedly demanding a military response.

Nebulous and unpredictable

The report begins with the mantra that the world is a more menacing place than ever, with direct threats multiplying and danger at every turn. This is not right.

Security risks, which may or may not become threats, have certainly evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, becoming more nebulous and unpredictable. The UK has become ever more embedded in globalised networks of opportunity *and* vulnerability. With vulnerability comes uncertainty and risk, and with risk comes insecurity. This presents challenges to established ways of thinking and acting, not least in terms of understandings of 'security', power and the role of military capabilities. Defence planners are however generally conservative and this report represents a marked shift to military conservatism by the committee.

The last formal reviews of national security in 2010 (the *National Security Strategy* and the Ministry of Defence's *Global Strategic Trends—Out to 2040*) painted a frightening picture justifying continuous use of military force in the name of 'national security'. But a more balanced assessment, absent from the

committee's deliberations, must also take into account these long-term trends:

- The UK is more secure from direct military threats from other states than ever: it enjoys a prosperous, secure and stable regional neighbourhood and no longer faces the threat of societal destruction from a major, sustained external attack as during the cold war, recent Russian actions notwithstanding.
- High-casualty terrorist attacks are rare and do not constitute an existential threat to the state or our 'way of life'.
- Incidence of inter-state and intra-state war continues to decline and there has been a pronounced downward trend in the number of battle deaths.
- Intra-state conflicts are concentrated in only a small number of countries and are increasingly short-lived.
- The number of democracies continues to rise and the number of autocracies continues to decline.
- The world's average Human Development Index rose by 18% between 1990 and 2010 (41% from 1970), reflecting large improvements in life expectancy, school enrolment, literacy and income. Almost all countries have benefited.
- Extreme income poverty has fallen substantially, with the number of people living on less than $1.25 a day having declined from 1.9 billion in 1981 to 1.4 billion in 2005. The proportion living in extreme poverty halved, from 52.0% to 25.7%, during this period.
- Measures of state fragility indicate a marked decrease over 1995-2010.
- Co-operation and civil society—intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, transnational advocacy networks, mobile-phone and internet access—continues to intensify, favouring interconnectivity, a social democracy and political accountability.
- A succession of treaties and norms have cumulatively stigmatised, outlawed and eliminated many forms of violence (nuclear violence being perhaps the most important omission).

This is not a plea for wishful thinking, hoping the worst never happens. We cannot escape uncertainty and government must routinely think through long- as well as short-term risks and threats. But balance is required to allocate effectively scarce resources to long-term security needs—and to distinguish between necessary and optional military operations and capabilities.

Unrealistic and misguided

The committee's report implies the UK must be able to act everywhere against everything. This is profoundly unrealistic and misguided. In 2010 the Ministry of Defence outlined a range of military operations *of choice*, which included 'peace enforcement', 'military assistance to stabilisation and development', 'power projection', 'focused intervention', and 'deliberate intervention'. These go far beyond the standing military tasks generally considered necessary, legitimate and uncontroversial in support of the UK state and citizenry: assistance in civil emergencies, evacuating UK citizens from overseas, residual protection from direct attack, protecting UK airspace and waters, and a maritime contribution to global protection of sea lanes upon which the UK economy is highly dependent.

The committee's report implies that the tasks in the first list are *not* operations of choice and that the UK has to engage in all of them—and to have a much broader suite of military capabilities to do so. But such decisions are deeply political, not obvious or objective as the committee suggests, and its report does a disservice by straitjacketing 'security' within a state-centric, militarised frame.

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The committee is silent on the efficacy of the use of UK military force as part of the 'global war on terror'. Yet participation in the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq has proved deeply problematic. It has facilitated the rise of Islamic State, echoing al-Qaeda's nihilistic medievalism, and a

wider sectarian civil war across the region fuelled by some erstwhile ‘allies’. The western state-building programmes in Afghanistan and Iraq have had very uncertain outcomes after more than a decade of massive investment and horrendous violence, at enormous human cost. More, this response to the ‘9/11’ attacks has brought heightened risk of further terrorist attacks in the UK, as noted by the former MI5 director general Eliza Mannigham-Buller, the curtailment of civil liberties and the securitisation of daily life in the name of essential ‘counter-terrorism’.

In response the committee proposes more of the same, fulfilling Paul Rogers’ warning in 2002 of a remilitarisation of international politics and the emergence of endless war, as military-led risk mitigation generated new and potentially more dangerous risks deemed susceptible to further military solutions. And it presents a false dichotomy of hyper-interventionism *versus* isolationism, as if there were not a spectrum of political responses to the risks and threats outlined. As prime minister, Tony Blair did the same after ‘9/11’, when he presented a binary choice between a ‘titanic struggle’ and ‘benign inactivity’.

Not new

Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its strategic destabilisation of southern and eastern Ukraine, fuelling civil war, is indeed dangerous and exacerbated by a plethora of threats to the UK’s European partners. But the context is not new and the committee should not pretend it is.

Relations among Russia, NATO and the US reached new highs after ‘9/11’, with unprecedented co-operation, intelligence sharing, and military-to-military exchanges. They began to deteriorate after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the triumphalist, unilateralist, neo-conservative vision of the George W. Bush US presidency. A low was reached in two hostile speeches by the vice-president, Dick Cheney, in Vilnius, in May 2006 and the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007.

Cheney eulogised the US ‘freedom agenda’ and lambasted authoritarian Putinism, while Putin railed against what he saw as US imperialism, Washington’s supposed hidden hand behind by the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia (‘rose’, 2003), Ukraine (‘orange’, 2004) and Tajikistan (‘tulip’, 2005) and a feared US plot to orchestrate a similar ‘revolution’ in Moscow. The new Georgian president, Mikhail Saakashvili, stoked the fires of Russian chauvinism, in the mistaken hope that the US would come to his aid when violence ensued over disputed Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. These are familiar themes today and the roots of the turbulent relationship between Russia and the west stretch back decades, extending equally to the nuclear realm.

Nuclear-capable bomber overflights are also not new: Russia resumed active bomber patrols in 2007. Similarly, Russia has been recapitalising its aging, nuclear-armed, intercontinental ballistic missiles with ‘new generation’ missiles since 2010—in part to overcome US missile defences, following withdrawal from the US-Russian Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty by the Bush administration in 2002, as part of its rejection of multilateralism and treaty-based arms control—and its ballistic-missile submarines and submarine-launched ballistic missiles since the 1990s. The US, the UK and France have, and are, engaged in comparable programmes, at enormous expense.

This is part and parcel of living in a nuclear-armed world, in which the protagonists believe in the indefinite value and legitimacy of nuclear weapons. The UK is a central player in this and directly contributes to the ongoing risk of massive nuclear violence. This is a collective problem which ultimately requires the collective solution of a world free of nuclear weapons—admittedly very difficult for the committee to envisage when it includes Julian Lewis, Parliament’s foremost nuclear hawk, and John Woodcock, the MP for Barrow (where UK ballistic-missile submarines are built) and Labour’s most strident nuclear champion. The committee’s response, that the UK should instead invest in its own ballistic-missile defences, is perverse—given the size of the Russian missile fleet, the enormous cost of missile defences and major doubts over their technical efficacy.

A UK military presence and even active intervention may well be the most promising means of realising

essential security requirements in a very limited set of circumstances. But its long-term security cannot be realised through never-ending participation in a US-led 'global guardian' doctrine. This approach is far from neutral and rooted in military activism, destabilisation and intervention as a taken-for-granted practice to combat seemingly implacable threats from the world's illiberal spaces.

When the new defence committee is convened after the general election it should take a holistic, long-term view on three core issues. It should examine how the UK can organise its economic, political and security capabilities—including but beyond the military—over the next few *decades* to:

1. respond to the consequences of a 2C+ rise in global temperature, as climate change interacts with other environmental and social stressors;
2. contribute to a sustainable security environment in the Middle East, not least through climate-resilient socio-economic development and bearing in mind the evidenced limits and often counter-productive effects of external military intervention; and
3. contribute to a sustainable security relationship between Russia and Europe, accepting that Russia may remain semi-authoritarian over that period—Russia is integral to a stable European security environment and it is counter-productive to dismiss its security concerns as wholly illegitimate or to slide back wilfully into a familiar, cold-war relationship which could cement hostility for a generation.